



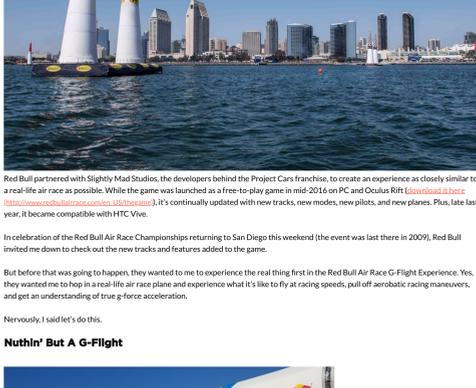
THE RED BULL AIR RACE: REAL LIFE VS. THE VR GAME

NEWS (NEWS) Apr 19, 2017 by [@davidmattias](#) ([@davidmattias](#))

This past weekend Red Bull hosted the 30th Red Bull Air Race World Championship in San Diego, California. For those unfamiliar with the air race sport, pilots fly through an obstacle course of pylons (called "Air Gates"), usually over water or air fields, competing for the fastest time. The pilots fly in light weight, high performance, aerobatic airplanes with a wingspan less than 25 feet that can reach speeds of up to 265 mph.

Now what does the air race have to do with gaming and virtual reality?

The Red Bull Air Race originally launched in 2003, but after the 2010 series Red Bull took a three-year hiatus to reorganize and rework some of the safety protocols for the race. Since relaunching in 2014, the Red Bull Air Race World Championships has exploded with popularity so the team at Red Bull decided to capitalize on that excitement by launching [Red Bull Air Race - The Game](#) ([http://www.redbullairrace.com/en_US/the-game](#)) last year.



Red Bull partnered with Slightly Mad Studios, the developers behind the Project Cars franchise, to create an experience as closely similar to a real-life air race as possible. While the game was launched as a free-to-play game in mid-2016 on PC and Oculus Rift ([download it here](#) ([http://www.redbullairrace.com/en_US/the-game](#))), it's continually updated with new tracks, new modes, new pilots, and new planes. Plus, late last year it became compatible with HTC Vive.

In celebration of the Red Bull Air Race Championships returning to San Diego this weekend (the event was last there in 2009), Red Bull invited me down to check out the new tracks and features added to the game.

But before that was going to happen, they wanted me to experience the real thing first in the Red Bull Air Race G-Flight Experience. Yes, they wanted me to hop in a real-life air race plane and experience what it's like to fly at racing speeds, pull off aerobatic racing maneuvers, and get an understanding of true g-force acceleration.

Nervously, I said let's do this.

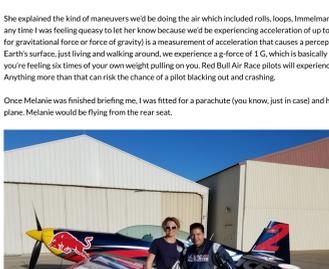
Nuthin' But A G-Flight



I met with Red Bull folks at the Brown Field Airport in southern San Diego, which was the launching point for the pilots competing in the air race. Each team had their own small hangars where they could maintain their planes as well as relax until it was their turn to race.

After a bunch of release forms and medical disclosures were signed and delivered, I suited up in an authentic racing pilot suit. Red Bull staff and flight technicians continually reminded me and everyone else participating to make sure our pockets were absolutely empty – no change, no keys, no phone – and not to wear a belt.

"Those things could kill you," one technician told us.

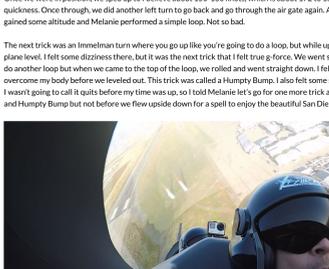


Once suited up, I met my pilot [Stéphanie Aublet](#) ([http://www.redbullairrace.com](#)). Born in England and raised in France, Melanie has been flying for 15 years and has been aerobatic flying for the past 12 years. She's a five-time champion in French aerobatic flying competitions and continually places in the top 10 in world championship competitions. She's also the first female pilot to compete in the Red Bull Air Race World Championships. [She's kind of a legend](#) ([http://www.espn.com/espn/culture/story/_/id/1779286/melanie-aublet-finds-culture-fra-women-wild-red-bull-air-race](#)).

"Don't worry, it'll be fine. I'll take care of you," she assured me.

She explained the kind of maneuvers we'd be doing in the air which included rolls, loops, Immelman turns, and other types of tricks. And if at any time I was feeling queasy to let her know because we'd be experiencing acceleration of up to 6 Gs or 6 g-forces. A g-force (which stands for gravitational force or force of gravity) is a measurement of acceleration that causes a perception of weight. For example, while on the Earth's surface, just living and walking around, we experience a g-force of 1 G, which is basically the weight of our body. So basically, at 6 Gs, you're feeling six times of your own weight pulling on you. Red Bull Air Race pilots will experience accelerations of up to 10 Gs to 12 Gs. Anything more than that can risk the chance of a pilot blacking out and crashing.

Once Melanie was finished briefing me, I was fitted for a parachute (you know, just in case) and hopped in the front seat of the two-seat plane. Melanie would be flying from the rear seat.



Once we got the all clear, Melanie started the engine and we made our way to the runway for takeoff. The takeoff was smooth and we quickly turned to get to the east side of the airport so we could race through the air gate that was setup in the middle of the airfield.

The view was breathtaking.

We had clear skies, the sun was setting in the west and we had stunning views of the Otay County Open Space Preserve. Tijana and its international airport were off in the distance too.

Once we were in position, we sped up to believe about 150-160 knots, which is about 172 to 180 mph, and hit that air gate with a quickness. Once through, we did another left turn to go back and go through the air gate again. After the second run through the gate, we gained some altitude and Melanie performed a simple loop. Not so bad.

The next trick was an Immelman turn where you go up like you're going to do a loop, but while upside down, you do a half-roll to make the plane level. I felt some dizziness there, but it was the next trick that I felt true g-force. We went straight up once again, like we were going to do another loop but when we came to the top of the loop, we rolled and went straight down. I felt the weight of five 170-pound gamers overcome my body before we leveled out. This trick was called a Humpty Bump. I also felt some sort of humpty bump in my stomach too. But I wasn't going to call it quits before my time was up, so I told Melanie let's go for one more trick and she did a combination of an Immelman and Humpty Bump but not before we flew upside down for a spell to enjoy the beautiful San Diego sunset.



Once we got on the ground and hopped out of the plane, there was a bit of dizziness and nausea, so I had to sit down for a bit and drink some water. Of course, I didn't even experience close to what air race and aerobatic pilots feel. What I went through was lightweight, Melanie told me. We'd only accelerated to 5.4 Gs.

"Always flying and training, our bodies get used to it," she said.

Nevertheless, the overall experience was incredible. There's a sort of freedom being up in the air pulling off tricks, speeding up, slowing down, and taking in the view of the land from hundreds of feet up in the air.

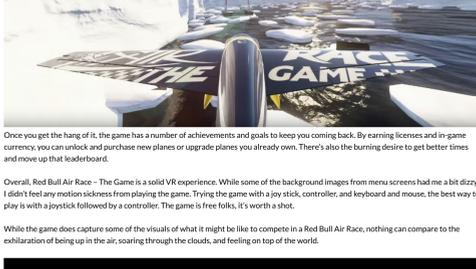
Comparing that G-Flight experience to playing Red Bull Air Race - The Game in VR? Not even close.

Taking Virtual Flight



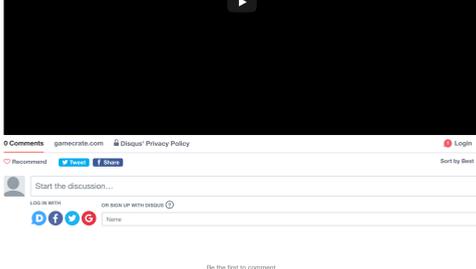
The game has three modes. Versus, where you compete against other players on a leaderboard. Solo, where you can practice your times and maneuvers, and World Championship allows players to play as real life pilots and compete in tournaments against other real life pilots.

The design of the game was solid. All of the tracks, 15 so far, look like their real life counterparts which includes San Diego, Indianapolis, and Las Vegas along with fictional tracks in the North Pole, The Great Wall of China, and Australia's Uluru National Park. The planes look great too as you have a number of choices ranging from Challenger class planes like the Extra 300 LX and Falcon RZ3 to Master class planes like the MXS-R and Zivko Edge 540 V3. Everything looks spectacular in VR.



Everything with the presentation surrounding Red Bull Air Race - The Game was exceptional, especially using Oculus Rift. The main issue I had with the game, however, is the gameplay. The game feels like it's caught between being a simulation and an arcade game. Using a joystick to fly the game, I ran the course trying to score the best time, but I had no control on how fast I was going. The game controls the speed of your plane so your only responsibility as the pilot is to make the turns and maneuvers through the air gates and the course.

This would be fine, but when playing for the first time the sensitivity of the movement seems too high. Any turn I'd make it'd be too far off to the left or right and I'd just veer off course. The same would happen with descending and ascending, a tail loop string up and you miss the air gate entirely. Admittedly, I'm not a regular player of any flight games, simulation or arcade, so my skill level is questionable. There weren't any options in the game to change the sensitivity, but after a few runs I started to get used to the feel of the game and improved a little bit every time I ran a course. So there's a bit of learning curve here and the controls and sensitivity may take some getting used to.



Once you get the hang of it, the game has a number of achievements and goals to keep you coming back. By earning licenses and in-game currency, you can unlock and purchase new planes or upgrade planes you already own. There's also the burning desire to get better times and move up that leaderboard.

Overall, Red Bull Air Race - The Game is a solid VR experience. While some of the background images from menu screens had me a bit dizzy, I didn't feel any motion sickness from playing the game. Trying the game with a joystick, controller, and keyboard and mouse, the best way to play is with a joystick followed by a controller. The game is free folks, it's worth a shot.

While the game does capture some of the visuals of what it might be like to compete in a Red Bull Air Race, nothing can compare to the exhilaration of being up in the air, soaring through the clouds, and feeling on top of the world.



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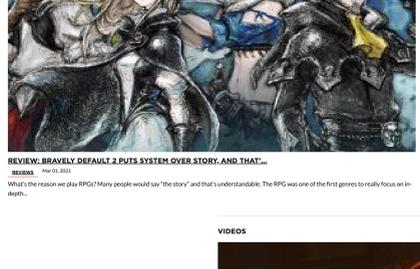
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